FOREWORD

George Marcus

“This book is intended to help the trained anthropologist doing field work, and also to stimulate accurate observation and the recording of information thus obtained by anyone in contact with peoples and cultures hitherto imperfectly described.”

So reads the inside cover copy of Notes and Queries on Anthropology (sixth edition, 1967; first edition, 1897!), revised and rewritten by a committee of the Royal Anthropological Institution of Great Britain and Ireland—the venerable handbook that has served generations of fieldworkers—professional and the curious amateur alike. Considerably more contemporary and addressed specifically to a new frontier of research, Ethnography and Virtual Worlds, a work by four authors writing also in an impressively seamless and collective voice, is offered nonetheless in the very same spirit. “Handbook” is one of the common labeling terms nowadays to dub contributions to the burgeoning literature on social research methods (in which ethnography is prominent), but few, if any, in my reading are as well designed as this work. It is meant to be used in advance of fieldwork as a clear and exhaustive introduction to the method; alongside it in its application to virtual worlds, in which each of the authors is deeply accomplished as a researcher; and in the crucial analytic-descriptive thinking about how to approach the collection and reporting of data.

Other than its well-crafted features as a manual and reference at hand, this work is distinctive for how it argues for the ethnographic method at a time when the reputation of ethnography and demand for it as the premier modality of qualitative research by all sorts of agencies, organizations, and design- and policy-driven projects have never been higher. With far more researchers adopting ethnographic methods than those who have been formally trained in those methods—in either its historic anthropological or sociological traditions—the irony is that its popularity threatens to undermine its validity and effectiveness. There is a tendency toward dilution, that is, for the data derived from subjects to lack a rich,
critically developed context for interpretation, or toward fieldwork as the license to indulge speculation in a more authoritative guise. Direct engagement with subjects is the hallmark of fieldwork, and the minimal and perhaps Ur-modality of this, in the proliferation of ethnographic method, is the conversation or interview situation, or, as the authors remark, the function of elicitation. But without participant observation—or “being there,” in recent tradecraft slang—interviews, even a series of layered interviews, lack the fabric and shell of the immersive experience of trying to live “inside,” along with the patient, self-critical discipline of imposing objectivity on this experience by reflexive observational practices and their expression in intimate, constant recording of fieldnotes.

So while the authors provide a fine treatment of interviewing and elicitation techniques as well, they embed it in their considerable efforts to explain the demands and standards of sustained “being in fieldwork.” They do so by a painstaking anticipation of both the misconceptions about the capacities of fieldwork (e.g., that it cannot be generalized beyond a specific observed instance) and the tendencies to shortcut it that are so ironically present in an era of social research that otherwise values what it purports to elucidate—the experiential, the practiced, and the understood among users and participants in the systems and organized projects of reason and technology that penetrate everyday life virtually everywhere and everywhere virtually.

And in this last phrase, the authors find their special agenda and mission: the overarching doubt that they address—that fieldwork methods, developed phenomenologically for “being there” in real-time, existential communities in the here and now, can be applied faithfully and with ingenuity to virtual worlds and communities enabled by contemporary information technologies. Indeed, ethnographies of virtual worlds—in the form of games and online communities (but not, or at least not yet, significantly, websites, platforms, email, databases, and networks like Facebook, which are outside their purview)—not only have been pioneered and achieved, by the Handbook’s authors among others, but are now a manifestly vigorous, growing genre of research. Still the authors self-consciously choose to present their account of fieldwork by inflecting it with a certain tactical orthodoxy that is by no means stodgy. Their writing is in fact open-minded, filled with bright and lively ideas, advice, and innovative thinking about how fieldwork in online communities must change in order to remain the same (e.g., the domain of “textual listening” as a form of interviewing; their acute discussions and guidance about transcription; their brilliant and practical treatment
of data-capturing methods). In presentation, however, it remains very important to establish the link with the achievements and capabilities of past ethnography—to reinforce its authority—as against commonsensical thinking that fieldwork in virtual worlds must somehow be different, must be less present or accessible to its subjects, that while connecting with its subjects, it cannot provide as thorough or deep knowledge of them as it could of its traditional physical world subjects. These authors do a masterful and convincing job of countering this common sense by the force and originality of their restatement of fieldwork as a method in the form of notes and queries oriented specifically to the study of virtual communities and social spaces.

Finally, since this account of method is strongly influenced by the specifically anthropological tradition of ethnography (three of the four authors having strong ties to it), it is worth reflecting on how engagements with virtual worlds in classic anthropological ethnography have morphed into its current field of study in the form of online cultures. After all, virtual worlds were in a sense the currency and intellectual challenge of much past ethnographic description and analysis in anthropology. Think of ethnographic efforts to grasp and descriptively report on the Dreamtime of Australian Aboriginal peoples. Think of the rich literature on shamanistic belief and ritual systems that mediate intimately the everyday lived realities of people with parallel, unseen worlds of beings and spirits that mirror and track everything that happens in the everyday.

During the pre-internet era of the late 1980s, in research on how wealth is constituted, virtually, as an unseen world that has authority over the everyday lives of the dynastic rich (in Marcus 1998), I tried to employ an ethnographic example of a Melanesian unseen or virtual world (of the Kaluli as brilliantly explored by Edward and Bambi Schieffelin, and by Steve Feld) as a contribution to an ethnographic understanding of a kind of fetishism in capitalist wealth accumulation and, in retrospect, as a waymark in my thinking that led to the postulation of the emergence of a distinctive trend of multi-sited research in the 1990s. The authors of this Handbook indicate that this postulation was in turn a kind of proto-stage in the development of ethnographic methods adapted to current internet-enabled virtual worlds. To quote Edward Schieffelin on Kaluli virtuality (in Marcus 1998:152):

In talking about the people of the other world, the Kaluli use the term *mama*, which means shadow or reflection. When asked what the people of the unseen look like, Kaluli will point to a reflection in a pool or
a mirror and say, “They are not like you or me. They are like that.” In the same way, our human appearance stands as a reflection to them. This is not a “supernatural” world, for to the Kaluli, it is perfectly natural. Neither is it a “sacred world,” for it is virtually coextensive with and exactly like the world the Kaluli inhabit, subject to the same forces of mortality. . . In the unseen world, every man has a reflection in the form of a wild pig . . . that roams invisibly on the slopes of Mt. Bosavi. The man and his wild pig reflection live separate existences, but if something should happen to the wild pig, the man is also affected. If it is caught in a trap, he is disabled; if it is killed by hunters of the unseen, he dies. (1976:96–97)

While known by the Kaluli in everyday life in an episodic and commonsensical way, the unseen world is systematically imagined in ritual and discourse through mediums, who, roughly like ethnographers, have been to this other world and have seen what ordinary persons can only hear traces of. Communication with the unseen world and authoritative interpretation of events in the here-and-now world of the Kaluli thus depend on the coherent vision of mediums, who at certain moments give presence and order to Kaluli culture by creating primarily visualized representations of the unseen world within the fully sensed world of the here and now. While the ethnographer treats the unseen world respectively as if it were real, parallel, independent, yet implicated in constituting plainly observed Kaluli life, he or she has no apparent choice but finally to represent the unseen world as fully encapsulated by the here-and-now Kaluli cultural order, as fully present in the conventional category of ethnographic description, their “beliefs.”

In that 1989 article I went on to evoke the engines of dynastic wealth, held and enjoyed by a family, as like the Kaluli unseen world, but whose virtuality (its constitution as facts and figures of ownership, investment, and practices of wealth management) could be materially investigated if the ethnographer, otherwise caught up in the dramas of dynastic family relations, would only move to the literal parallel sites of daily workshops of finance. Then emerges a project of multi-sited ethnography that makes literal what is otherwise empirically inaccessible and virtual in classic ethnography.

This is thus a personal parable of earlier research that I usefully understand now as a step between the virtual worlds encountered in, say, Melanesian ethnography, and the agile ways of thinking about them, as in the Kaluli research, and the kinds of virtual worlds that are now the subject of an ethnography, the methodology for which is so persuasively described
for use in this Handbook. Virtuality that was empirically inaccessible to the ethnographer among the Kaluli, except through the second-order practices and interpretations of shamanistic paraethnographers of the virtual, is now directly accessible to the ethnographer through internet technologies and participations as a direct object of study by traditional fieldwork research methods.

While there is a vestigial sense that contemporary virtual worlds must somehow be related to everyday life, in the real-time, phenomenological here and now to apply ethnographic methods—not so different from the classic situation of incorporating peoples' dreamtimes and parallel existences into ethnographic accounts (to be sure, this kind of research on internet virtual worlds, anchored in the conventional real, remains important as a trajectory of research)—the authors of this Handbook show that fieldwork on virtual worlds need not be formulated or limited in this way. Virtual worlds are now directly accessible as "real" life for full ethnographic study as they were not, for example, among the Kaluli (mama could not be actually observed and their separate worlds engaged with by ethnographers, in the way that, for example, avatars in Second Life or games can be). This Handbook practically and persuasively makes such beings and worlds as accessible as physical world groups to the application of ethnographic methods at their highest standards of practice.
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